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Populism

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Abstract

abspara0010 Populism is a concept applied to a wide range of political movements and actors across the globe. There is, at the same time, considerable confusion about the attributes and manifestation of populism, as well as its impact on democracy. This contribution identifies the defining elements of the populist ideology and discusses the varieties in which populism manifests itself, for instance as a component of certain party families. We finally discuss various normative interpretations of populism, and the tension between populism and liberal democratic values.

p0015 The Russian Narodniki movement of the 1860–70s is mostly seen as the first appearance of modern populism. This short-lived grassroots movement of intellectuals never achieved mass adherents but represented a radical articulation of the idea that wisdom resides with the common people and that socialism should be based on the traditional peasantry as its heartland (bib21 Taggart, 2000). American populism, beginning in the 1880s and continuing particularly in the South throughout the twentieth century, also referred to themes of moral decay, conspiracy, and betrayal of the ordinary people by the corrupt elite. The history of American populism could be portrayed as reactionary and a nativist movement of great 'democratic promise' (Goodwyn, 1976). In addition, Latin American populism of the mid-twentieth century has received much attention. The emphasis was on nation-building under a centralized and charismatic leadership (see bib24 Weyland, 2001; bib18 Roberts, 2006). From the 1980s, there is a resurgence throughout the world of movements and leaders that have been dubbed populist. These include, for instance Collor, Menem, Chavez, Obrador in Latin America; Le Pen, Haider, Wilders, Dewinter in Western Europe; Buchanan, Perot, Manning in the United States and Canada; Hanson in Australia; and Meciar, Milosevic, Lukashenko, Orbán in post-communist states. The populist label has been attached to a variety of political movements. It has been used as a term of approbation only by some movements themselves and mostly as a pejorative term by critics.

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Populism: Mobilization, Leadership, Style, or Ideology?

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p0020 The core idea of populism rests with the claim to represent or act in the name of the people, understood as the 'common people' and the 'silent majority.' Nevertheless, the main problem of defining populism is that most conceptualizations encompass very different traits, while analysts apply the term to diverse phenomena. One approach suggests that populism is essentially a strategy of *political mobilization* using a typical style of political rhetoric (Kazin, 1995). It considers populism to be a tool for a leader to seek and exercise power. Populist parties and leaders appeal to the power of the common people to challenge the legitimacy of the current political establishment. A second approach focuses on populism as a type of organization and a style of politics. Populism presents itself not as an ordinary party characterized by different factions and an appeal to a specific section of society, but as a unified bloc or movement of the people. The movement is characterized by a politics of personality centered on a strong, personalized, even *charismatic leader* who is said to embody the will of the common people and who is able to speak on their behalf. The leader–mass linkage is direct, rather than mediated by organizations. As a result, populist framing is linked to a particular *style of communication* (Tarchi, 2002). Populism utilizes an antitheoretical rhetoric and antiintellectual oratory to exploit feelings of resentment politically (bib5 Betz, 1994; bib1 Abts, 2012). Populists offer simplistic solutions to complex political problems in a very direct and demagogic language, appealing to the common sense of the people and denouncing the intellectualism of the established elites. Although charismatic leadership and simplistic language might be associated with populism, these action frames could only be understood as expressions of an underlying populist ideology. However, populism needs to be understood as a *thin-centered ideology* because it does not provide a comprehensive vision of society (bib12 Mudde, 2004; bib2 Abts and Rummens, 2007; bib20 Stanley, 2008). It only gives a precise meaning and priority to certain key concepts of political discourse, thereby generating a certain ideological picture of parts of the political domain.

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The Elements of the Populist Ideology

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p0025 Populism is intrinsically "a thin-centered ideology which advocates the sovereign rule of the people as a homogeneous body" (bib2 Abts and Rummens, 2007: p. 409). Three elements of populist ideology are recurrently highlighted in the literature. First, it is argued that populism revolves around a central *antagonistic relationship between 'the people' and 'the elite.'* Populism is an "appeal to 'the people' against both the established structure of power and the dominant ideas and values of society" (bib7 Canovan, 1999: p. 3). The establishment is attacked for its alleged privileges, its corruption, and especially, for its lack of accountability to the people. Elites are accused

AU3

of representing only their own interests and of being alienated from the real interests, values, and opinions of the common man.

p0030 Secondly, populism tries to give power back to the people and restore *popular sovereignty*. Populists believe that politics should be based on the immediate expression of the general will of the people. They speak and behave as if "democracy meant the power of the people and only the power of the people" (Mény and Surel, 2002: p. 9). Populist ideology favors more direct forms of democracy, such as majority rule or referenda, which should replace current representative and intermediary institutional arrangements. Thereby, the will of the people is considered to be transparent and immediately accessible to those willing to listen to the *vox populi*. Thus, populism is wary of compromise and accommodation, and emphasizes the need for a politics of will and decision (Urbinati, 1998: pp. 116–118). As a consequence, there is no need for elaborate discussion or party politics, and populist movements and parties are often headed by charismatic leaders who can speak and act directly on behalf of the people. Populist democracy can be understood as an attempt to achieve an immediate identity of governed and governing. Populists claim to present and proclaim, not to represent, the essentialist will of the people. In this way, populism opts for the idea of popular sovereignty, if necessary, at the expense of constitutional guarantees.

p0035 Thirdly, the transparency of the will of the people is possible because populism conceptualizes the *people as a homogeneous unity* (bib2 Abts and Rummens, 2007). In populist ideology, 'the people' functions as a central signifier, which receives a fundamentally monolithic interpretation. The people are united and indivisible, fully formed, self-aware, and identifiable by the majority of numbers. Accordingly, the people are not seen as a heterogeneous collection of social groups and individual subjects with diverse values, needs, and opinions. On the basis of a supposed shared identity, the people are considered to form a collective body, which is capable of having a common will and a single interest and which is able to express this will and to take decisions (Canovan, 2002: p. 34). Populist ideology, however, only implies *that* the people constitute a homogeneous body, it does not say *what* this substantive identity should be. All actual populist movements need to supplement their thin-centered populist ideology with additional values and beliefs that give content to this substantive unity. Populism, then, cohabits with other, more comprehensive ideologies depending on the context and the values of the heartland to which it appeals. Paradigmatic possibilities here would be a leftist version of populism that identifies the people in socioeconomic terms as the working-class exploited by a bourgeois elite or a right-wing populist movement that refers to ethnonational characteristics to identify the people with the (ethnic) nation (see bib15 Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser, 2013). The presumed unity of the people also implies that populism cultivates antagonistic relationships toward those who do not fit in and therefore threaten the homogeneity. Depending on the specific nature of the populist image of the people, this might include, for example, cultural and economic elites, foreigners, minorities, welfare recipients, or others. It can then be argued that populism is an inherently antipluralistic ideology. Based on these three core elements, scholars present different, yet overlapping, descriptions. bib12 Mudde (2004: p. 543) defines populism as "an ideology that considers society ultimately separated into two homogeneous and antagonistic groups, 'the pure people' versus 'the corrupt elite,' and argues that politics should be an expression of the *volonté générale* of the people." Albertazzi and McDonnell (2008: p. 3), on the other hand, conceptualize populism as "an ideology which pits a virtuous and homogeneous people against a set of elites and dangerous 'others' who are together depicted as depriving (or attempting to deprive) the sovereign people of their rights, values, prosperity, identity and voice."

p0040 Confronted with a great number and diversity of both movements and (ideological) traits it seems that populism occurs in various forms (e.g., style, strategy, and core ideological attribute), and is not confined to one specific type of political actor. Not all populists incarnate all the traits that define pure populism continuously or consistently. The diversity of populist movements is thus accommodated by different typologies of populism – types differentiated in terms of traits in the core definition, which they lack. In their groundbreaking edited volume on populism, Ionescu and Gellner (1969) already observed that populism was used to refer to actors from a wide-ranging set of political ideologies. Later, bib6 Canovan (1981: p. 133) argued that it was not possible to unite different populist movements "into a single political phenomenon with a single ideology, program or socioeconomic base." Notwithstanding the diversity among populist parties, several patterns can be distinguished. Populist leaders in Latin America, for example, tend to be characterized by a socioeconomically left position, whereas populism in Europe is often associated with the radical right (bib15 Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser, 2013). In the United States, in turn, populism is often seen as an intrinsic feature of politics, in view of the more general wariness of big government and the Washington elite (see bib23 Ware, 2002). More recently, the term has often been associated with the culturally conservative and anti-statist Tea Party. In organizational terms, populism in Europe is predominantly seen as a feature of political parties rather than individuals – even though many of those parties are characterized by centralized leadership and a strong figurehead. Irrespective of the general tendency of populism to cohabit with the xenophobic right, populism in Europe has also been associated with other 'party families.'

Populism in Party Families

s0020

p0045 bib13 Mudde (2007) has treated populism as a core element of the populist radical right (PRR), but also identified two other types of populist parties: neoliberal populists and social populists (see also bib11 March, 2011). Parties from the latter two families are mainly concerned with socioeconomic themes – promoting free-market economics and welfare protectionism, respectively – while PRR parties are, besides their populism, primarily characterized by their xenophobia and cultural conservatism (or: nativism and authoritarianism). Thus, even though it would not be accurate to speak of a populist 'party family,' because populist parties can come in various ideological shapes and guises, several party families can be distinguished for which populism is a defining characteristic.

p0050 Again, while there have been prominent examples of neoliberal populist parties (e.g., those of Silvio Berlusconi in Italy and Pim Fortuyn in the Netherlands) and social populists (such as Die Linke in Germany and Sinn Fein in the Republic of Ireland), the majority of the cases of populism in Europe appear to fall within the PRR category. In Western Europe, these parties are for instance characterized by their hostility against immigration and emphasis on the need for foreigners to adapt to the nation's customs. Several such parties have been around for quite a long time: the Front National (FN) in France was founded in 1972, the Flemish Interest (previously Flemish Block, VB) in 1978. Other parties with a longer history have transformed themselves into successful PRR parties more recently – the Austrian Freedom Party (FPÖ) and the Swiss People's Party being prime examples. In post-communist countries in Central and Eastern Europe, where immigration levels have been low or even negative, ethnic minorities – and in some countries the Roma population in particular – have typically been identified as the nonnative elements who threaten the homogeneity of the people. Examples include parties such as Jobbik in Hungary, the Greater Romania Party (PRM), and the Slovak National Party (SNS).

p0055 It must be noted that populism is not necessarily a phenomenon confined to certain parties only. In Europe, too, populism can take the form of a more fleeting rhetorical device used to blame (governing) electoral competitors for having lost touch with the 'ordinary people.' In post-communist countries, where political trust tends to be low and public sector corruption is often a salient electoral theme, many (newly established) political parties have voiced populist antiestablishment rhetoric (bib22 Van Kessel, 2014). The term populism has also regularly been used to describe large mainstream parties such as the Hungarian FIDESZ and the Polish Law and Justice (PiS).

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p0060 The difficulty in pinpointing exactly which actors are populist or not has added to the concept's unsystematic use and the more general conceptual confusion surrounding the term. Another problem of 'populism' is that the term is used rather randomly as a term of abuse and that populism is, without much substantiation, often automatically treated as a phenomenon that threatens the quality of democracy.

s0025 Populism and Democracy

p0065 Populism is regularly applied as a synonym for demagoguery, simplistic solutions, or opportunism (e.g., bib12 Mudde, 2004; bib21 Taggart, 2000). Especially in the vernacular sphere, the term is often used pejoratively to refer to vote-winning policy proposals, attempts to pander to public opinion, or anti-immigration attitudes (bib4 Bale et al., 2011). The academic debate about the concept may be more sophisticated, but also in scholarly literature, the term is frequently seen as a negative phenomenon. bib5 Betz (1994: p. 4), for instance, sees populism as a means of political opportunism that is unscrupulous and exploitative of the anxieties of the electorate. Others view populism's support for unmediated popular sovereignty as a threat to liberal democratic 'checks and balances' and the protection of minorities. bib2 Abts and Rummens (2007: p. 4), for instance, argued that populism is inherently incompatible with democracy; populism's conception of the people as a homogeneous body is fictional and "generates a logic which disregards the idea of otherness at the heart of democracy and aims at the suppression of diversity within society."

p0070 A more optimistic view is that populism is an indicator of the health of representative or liberal democracy. Although not denying the risks of populist politics, some scholars argue that populism emerges when the political elite loses track of the popular will, or when the 'constitutional' or 'liberal,' as opposed to the 'democratic' or 'popular' pillar of democracy, is seen to become too dominant. Taggart (2002: p. 63), for instance, argued that populism acts as a 'bellwether' for the health of representative politics. Mény and Surel (2002: p. 17) have described populism as "a warning signal about the defects, limits and weaknesses of representative systems," and argue that "in spite of its often unpleasant tones, it may constitute an effective reminder that democracy is not a given, but is instead a constant enterprise of adjustment to the changing needs and values of society." bib7 Canovan (1999: p. 11) speaks about the tension between the 'pragmatic' and 'redemptive' faces of democracy and argued that "When too great a gap opens up between haloed democracy and the grubby business of politics, populists tend to move on to the vacant territory, promising in place of the dirty world of party manoeuvring the shining ideal of democracy renewed. Even from the point of view of pragmatic politics, the vital practices of contestation and accountability grow weak without the energy provided by democracy's inspirational, mobilizing, redemptive side."

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p0075 Still, populism is seldom seen as an unequivocally good thing. Not many scholars appear to subscribe to bib10 Laclau's (2005: p. 48) argument that populism and democracy are essentially interchangeable terms and that "the end of populism coincides with the end of politics." bib16 Panizza (2005: p. 30) instead described populism as a 'mirror in which democracy can contemplate itself,' but argued that 'populism is neither the highest form of democracy nor its enemy.' In the same volume, bib3 Arditi (2005) argued that populism can appear in three possible modes: populism as a mode of representation, as a symptom, or as an underside. The first mode is compatible with liberal-democratic politics, the second presents a disturbance of democracy, whereas the latter entails an actual interruption of democracy. bib17 Pasquino (2008: p. 28), in turn, argued that the appearance of populism is often a sign of a poorly functioning democratic regime, but that populism, for instance due to its unrealizable promises, has a negative impact on the democratic framework itself.

p0080 An edited volume by bib14 Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser (2012) attempted to test empirically the consequences of populism in several countries in Europe and the Americas. Based on the various case studies, the editors concluded that populism can be a corrective as well as a threat to democracy. Populism can, for instance, place issues on the agenda which have been ignored by the political establishment and give voice to excluded sections of society, but especially in unconsolidated democracies, can also undermine liberal democratic institutions in view of its monist conception of society and disdain for 'checks and balances.'

p0085 As a consequence, an obvious question is how established political actors could react to emerging populism. A quick

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glance reveals that Western Europe is divided about how to deal with PRR parties. In Italy, Austria, Denmark, and the Netherlands a rather open and accommodating approach prevails whereby populist challengers are treated as ordinary political opponents and forms of cooperation remain possible. In other countries, such as France and Belgium, institutional and political actors pursue a much more repressive and antagonistic approach whereby the populist parties are delegitimized and treated as genuine enemies of the democratic system (bib9Eatwell and Mudde, 2004). Consequently, the public debate is largely determined by different stances toward the well-known dilemma of 'tolerance for the intolerant.' On the one hand, the *procedural view* conceives of democracy as a set of procedures organizing the struggle for power. In the electoral marketplace, all opinions and parties are tolerated as long as they follow the procedural rules. As a result, freedom of expression and association is almost unlimited. The adherents of the procedural view propose to treat populist parties as legitimate opponents in the political struggle, while it would be inappropriate to challenge political opponents with repressive rules of exclusion. On the other hand, the *substantive view* advocates a more repressive stance toward populism, in case it leads to extremism. Democratic procedures are not an end in themselves but only the means for realizing and protecting a set of substantive democratic values and rights. Consequently, all political parties are required to underwrite the fundamental values of freedom, equality, respect, and tolerance. As far as populists threaten these values, the tolerance for the intolerant may be limited. In this sense, repressive measures like a cordon sanitaire, which aim to obstruct extremist parties, are not allowed but actually required (bib8Capoccia, 2007: pp. 55–67). Instead, bib19Rummens and Abts (2010) propose a concentric containment policy for dealing with populist parties in trying to overcome the traditional opposition between procedural and substantive views of democracy. On the procedural side, this policy emphasizes the importance of tracking all the relevant concerns of citizens in the public sphere, whereas, on the substantive side, it stresses the need for an adequate filtering which guarantees the compatibility of actual policies with the core values of liberty and equality. Their proposed twofold requirement of tracking and filtering translates into a guideline of decreasing tolerance toward populists as they approach the centers of formal decision-making power. The resulting containment policy listens to populist voters, but puts simultaneously unremitting civilizing pressure on populist parties themselves.

See also: 93003; 93031; 93087.

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